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## The Stroessner Regime and Indigenous Resistance in Paraguay

### Cover Page Footnote

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Popular images of *The Mission* (1986) remind us of the continuous fate of Indigenous Peoples in Paraguay from colonial to national times. However, despite all attacks to their lands and cultures, today, they have survived and have been able to maintain their way of life in opposition to integrationist state practices and the capitalist system. *The Stroessner Regime and Indigenous Resistance in Paraguay* (2007) by René D. Harder Horst is an ethnohistorical journey to the years between 1958-1992 when Paraguay was living under the longer-lasting dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner. This was a time when the push for development and modernization in this South American nation-state, another chapter in the imposition of Western values, led to the strengthening of an active indigenous movement to defend ancestral territories, resources, and identity. By the time that General Stroessner was deposed from power, Indigenous Peoples in Paraguay had won important legal protections, however ambiguous and unevenly applied, and had become politically savvy in dealing with the state and religious missionaries. The specific focus of this book is precisely the interaction between Indigenous Peoples, the state, and the missionaries and the ways in which they influenced both state indigenist policy and indigenous resistance to national integration and the continuous attacks on their communities.

The Stroessner's regime perceived Indigenous Peoples as obstacles for economic development and thus encouraged agricultural settlements and proselytizing on indigenous lands. The author claims that "[i]n less than a decade, these policies did lead to a transformation, although they rarely proceeded as planned. Instead, indigenous peoples shaped the interaction with outsiders and altered the regime's plans for social inclusion" (33). The author relies on articles from 12 different newspapers, personal interviews conducted with various indigenous leaders, and a wealth of secondary sources to recount vividly and with many details how Stroessner's policies vacillated from inclusion to exclusion, obeyed to specific plans for the development of

Paraguay, but were also a response to outside pressures and international scrutiny by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and the Catholic Church.

In his book, the author aptly illustrates how Indigenous Peoples skillfully took advantage of both political and economic opportunities and international pressure in order to advance their claims. Instead of placing the emphasis on an analysis of the political and economic structures that helped shape state policies and indigenous resistance, the author provides a convincing argument that Indigenous Peoples responded, manipulated, and changed such policies, and yet, in the process, they became more integrated to national society. Through historical evidence, the author makes us realize that in fact, if the Guaraní, Avá, Mak'a, Enenlhit, Nivaklé, Ache, Mbyá, Pa'i Tavyterã, Ayoreode, Maskoy, Enhilt, Toba-Qom, and all other indigenous groups in Paraguay, had not engaged in one way or another with the economic and political processes unleashed by the desire of General Stroessner and other Paraguayan elites to become a developed and modernized nation, they would not have been able to survive the aggressive encroachment on their lands and violation of their human rights.

The attention to both structures and agency gives us an important insight into indigenous resistance especially because the author is able to paint for us a complex historical portrait of a critical moment for Indigenous Peoples in Paraguay as they had to deal with increasing, often violent, integrationist mentalities and practices of dominant society; rampant racism and discrimination; and ethnocide. Indigenous resistance to these issues has taken all forms and shapes but the author highlights especially those strategies that helped Indigenous Peoples to defend their lands and resources and gain recognition within the nation. He focuses on how various indigenous communities responded to state policies by engaging with state agencies, Catholic and Protestant missionaries, anthropologists, the media, NGOs, the national and international publics. In addition, the



author also pays attention to how Indigenous Peoples used their identities to protect lands, resources, lifestyles, and cultures and how, in the process, had to recreate such identities in order to survive as peoples within the Paraguayan nation-state.

Indigenous Peoples are important actors in all kinds of arenas and have been able to create discourses and practices that speak to a common notion of indigeneity. While this has been the product of difficult encounters, struggles, and negotiations, they all agree on a common history of oppression, a distinctive culture and way of life, a close attachment to territory, and a common ethos, among other things. These elements have provided the basis for a notion of indigeneity and, thus, the possibilities for pan-indigenous organizing as it has happened not only in Paraguay but throughout the world as well. But these elements also provide the essence of resistance, as Stefano Varese claims<sup>1</sup>, for they are the fundament of their physical and cultural survival as peoples and the source of knowledge about the world, memories, everyday practices, etc. Despite Stroessner's efforts to remove indigenous communities from their ancestral territories and to remove any distinction from the rest of society, Indigenous Peoples in Paraguay were able to gain and use legal protection for their lands and cultures.

Looking at resistance simply as a strategy for survival, however, could be reductionist and naïve. Resistance, as the author shows, also brought accommodation to dominant culture and ultimately, integration to national society in significant ways, at the same time that it also changed that dominant culture. Indigenist or pro-indigenous legislation at the national level while it opened spaces for political participation to Indigenous Peoples, it also opened opportunities to change the political culture of the state. For example, indigenous communities were able to push in the drafting of the New Constitution of Paraguay for "toleration of ethnic plurality, equal treatment for minority groups, and national respect for differing ways of life, ideals new in Paraguay's traditional political culture" (101).

Another contribution of this book is that it complicates the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and the Churches. The author points to the ambiguous place of the Catholic and Protestant churches-pro-indigenous at some times and pro-state at others-and the important role played by catholic and protestant missionaries in the implementation of indigenist policies, in assisting indigenous claims and rights, as well as in opposing state's control. The Paraguayan state since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century looked at the missionaries' work as a way to acculturate and integrate Indigenous Peoples into the national society. For example, the 1907 *Ley de Reducciones de Tribus Indígenas* promised land to any missionaries who helped the state to "reduce" the indigenous population and come into the state's guardianship. The idea was to free land for settlement, investments, and development and to create a cheap source of labor.

In chapter 2 "A Racially Mixed Nation and an Authoritarian Political Culture" the author provides a necessary background to understand early patterns of interaction between Indigenous People, dominant Paraguayan society, and the state: 1) mestizaje, 2) elite's tolerance to dictatorial rule and authoritarianism, 3) Chaco war, and 4) official bilingual policy that includes Spanish and Guaraní. The first three contributed to unequal land distribution and to increasing contact between Indigenous Peoples and the rest of society. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state adopted indigenismo as a policy to integrate the indigenous population; at the same time, racist ideas kept them in an inferior status.

Chapter 3 "A State Policy of Integration, 1958-1966"

documents that in 1959, Stroessner created the Department of Indigenous Affairs to settle the remaining indigenous population into colonies, document the existence of indigenous communities, provide assistance to improve conditions, and diminish widespread prejudice against indigenous people. Many of these colonies were infamous for the abuses committed against indigenous men, women, and children. The DAI worked closely with the catholic missions, the Anglicans and Mennonites to change the lifestyle and culture of indigenous population. Proselytizing and settlement-of the Ache and Ayoreode, for example-changed indigenous communities in important ways, as they became linked to national culture and markets. While indigenous people rejected national development plans, they did take advantage of state assistance (medicine, food, tools) and increased their agricultural production and participation in wage labor.

Chapter 4 "Integration Turns to Exclusion, 1967-1976" explains that when the pace of integration of indigenous communities did not increase, Stroessner instructed the new director of DAI to undercut assistance and evict indigenous people from ranches; he also started a more aggressive program to force cultural changes. Many of these actions were condemned by non-governmental organizations focused on human rights, anthropologists interested in advocacy, and members of the Catholic Church interested in defending indigenous people. All of this, together with increasing international scrutiny of Stroessner's indigenist policy, forced the regimen to at least promise to protect indigenous cultures. The author argues that this also allowed Indigenous Peoples to organize broadly for the first time in defense of their lands at the same time that "these developments altered indigenous communities, helped undermine the regime's legitimacy, and changed the outcome of the state's plans to integrate indigenous people" (67).

A significant development in this period was the change of the Catholic Church attitude towards the regime and Indigenous Peoples as a result of Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) when Pope XXIII called for the defense of human rights as a way to evangelize. In short, it no longer wanted to cooperate with the state's plans to integrate the indigenous population. The Protestant missions instead, increased their support to the state's plans for acculturation. By 1974, however, members of the Catholic Church shifted again their position as they tried to establish closer links with the regime due to extensive repression and a conservative backlash within the Vatican.

In terms of anthropological advocacy, the 1971 *Declaración de Barbados* called for the liberation of Indigenous Peoples. This document was debated in Paraguay, as well as in many other Latin American countries, and helped to bring international attention to the indigenous plight. Stroessner's regime was accused of genocidal practices. Furthermore, the efforts of anthropologists, NGOs-like the Marandú Project-, and catholic missionaries helped Indigenous Peoples to organize and begin communicating directly with the government and with other indigenous organizations throughout Latin America. This permitted them to reflect and legitimate their indigenous cultures and to be critical of their situation as a product of colonization and national abuses. Indigenous leaders rejected integrationism and called for the encouragement of self-management, respect for cultural diversity, and equal treatment before the law. The author claims that "[a]s indigenous organizations began to pose obstacles to easy development of the countryside and attract negative attention to the regime's policies in the mid-1970s, Stroessner's generals began trying to clear native people from the



path of development and to limit their efforts to organize" (98).

Chapter 5 "The Indigenous Resistance to Exclusion, 1976-1987" explains how and why despite positive legislation on indigenous rights-*Ley 904 Estatuto de Comunidades Indígenas* (1981)-indigenous communities were excluded from the development and modernization projects of Paraguay. This was manifested in violent and aggressive attacks and evictions from their lands in order to free up land for ranching and farming. *Law 904* was passed to appease the criticism of the regime for human rights abuses and cover up the detrimental effects of the integrationist policy, but Indigenous Peoples began using it to focus their resistance with the help of many groups, including the Catholic Church, who were becoming very discontent with the regime. Although Indigenous Peoples united and organized throughout the country to defend their lands and resources, only in few isolated cases, they were successful. However, from this experience, Indigenous Peoples learned to use their ethnic identities in political struggles.

In the last chapter "Indigenous Mobilization and Democracy in Paraguay, 1988-1992" the author claims that the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1988 encouraged Indigenous Peoples to demand their legal rights as he called the state to improve their land-tenure situation. As a result, the regime lost its ability to oppose indigenous claims. After the fall of Stroessner, the new regime, despite promises made in campaigns, continued the policies of integration and exclusion of the indigenous people. However, they could choose the way of integration into national society and indigenous communities defended actively independent production and communal land tenure.

In 1991, the Instituto Nacional del Indígena (INDI) which had replaced the DAI in the mid 70s, asked the government to include indigenous concerns in the drafting of the new constitution. Indigenous leaders worked with the organizations, the Catholic Church and political parties to form part of the constitutional convention. They called for the respect of their cultural distinctiveness, laws, and lands and asked to be included in the development of the country. They were not allowed to participate in the convention as an indigenous bloc, but were able to have 4 delegates. The convention finally accepted to include indigenous rights in the Constitution. The Constitution recognize them as culturally distinct peoples with rights to their habitats and practice their own lifestyle. They were also given the right to own land communally and to participate in national society. The Constitution also defends them from economic exploitation and exempts them from social or political duties, such as compulsory military service. The author argues that the successes in the drafting of the New Constitution in Paraguay paved the way to other indigenous struggles elsewhere in Latin America.

In pan-indigenous movements in Latin America today, Indigenous Peoples in Paraguay do not play a very significant role and international attention is not as focused on them as it was before, however, for any student of indigenous movements, this book would certainly present a complex picture on state-Indigenous Peoples- missionaries relationships that can be used to compare similar situations elsewhere. The author tries to present a nuanced view, backed with historical facts, of the development of their attitudes towards each other. Since the book finishes in 1992 the author does not tell us what is the situation of Indigenous Peoples in Paraguay today, nor he has to do it, but it would be interesting to know how despite legal gains and the organizing momentum, the indigenous movement in Paraguay failed to become major players in indigenous struggles in the

Americas and throughout the world. In September 14, 2007 the United Nations finally passed and adopted the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* that recognizes and sustains many of claims that the author documents in his book. This makes it even more imperative to document, as the author has done, why the recognition of indigenous rights at the national level has become paramount not only for Indigenous Peoples themselves but also for the rest of us.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Personal Communication, May 12, 2008.

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